

Economic Impact Analysis Module

Parks may choose to include several questions related to visitor spending that can be used to determine the regional economic impacts of visitors. This data can be entered into the Money Generation Model (MGM2), which estimates sales, income and jobs in the region supported by park visitor spending. As part of this survey module, parks receive an additional economic impact report and a custom version of MGM2 spreadsheet (MS Excel) containing park-specific data, spending and multipliers. For sample reports, see MGM2 web site: <<http://www.prr.msu.edu/mgm2>>. Parks may also choose to prepare their own economic analysis.

To Participate In A VSP Study

To apply for a VSP study, complete and return a Visitor Study Nomination Form to your Regional VSP Point-of-Contact (contact names are listed on the nomination form). VSP nomination forms are at web site: <<http://www.psu.uidaho.edu>>.

Please note: VSP methodology is not appropriate for parks with very low visitation—less than 300 visitor groups/week for the entire park (a visitor group is one or more people traveling together). Such parks should contact the Visiting Chief Social Scientist for assistance with a visitor study, phone: 202-513-7189, email: jgramann@tamu.edu.

To learn more about the Visitor Services Project, contact:

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The Visitor Services Project



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Introduction

Who are park visitors? Where are they from? What do they do? What are their opinions about the facilities they use, and interpretive programs they attend? What park features and qualities are most important to them? Visitor Services Project (VSP) visitor studies answer these questions—and more. The VSP, an ongoing research project of the National Park Service Social Science Program, provides superintendents with usable knowledge about visitors. This brochure provides a brief description of the VSP, highlights project benefits, and explains how parks can participate in a VSP study.



The VSP began in 1982 when the National Park Service (NPS), recognizing the need to learn more about visitors and their opinions, asked the University of Idaho Cooperative Park Studies Unit (UI CPSU, now called UI Park Studies Unit) staff to develop a new approach to visitor studies. The UI CPSU developed a technique that provides an easy-to-understand, consistent, and efficient means of studying visitors.

Since 1988, the VSP has conducted over 150 in-depth visitor studies in 115 units of the National Park System. Through these studies, park staffs obtain accurate, customized information about visitors—who they are, what they do, their needs and opinions. Some of the results from VSP studies are presented in *Serving the Visitor*,

an annual NPS “report card” describing how well the visiting public is being served. VSP questionnaires and reports are available on the VSP web site.

Each year, there are opportunities for a limited number of parks to participate in a VSP study. Parks fund their own studies (the Washington office funds VSP permanent salaries)—the cost averages approximately \$12,000 - \$25,000. To be eligible, park staff complete and submit a VSP nomination form to their regional office (see instructions under the heading “*To Participate in a VSP Study*”). The VSP process works at parks that receive at least 300 visitor groups per week. Each region submits a prioritized list of parks that apply by the annual deadline. The VSP Advisory Committee (made up of NPS employees) meets annually to evaluate the nominations. The committee recommends parks for VSP studies during the following fiscal year to the Associate Director of Natural Resource Stewardship and Science for final approval.

—*“Continue surveying visitors. It is important for us to know that our opinions are being considered in your plans for the future of the park.”*

— a visitor’s comment

The VSP Process

The VSP process is tailored to each NPS unit that is selected, and follows seven simple steps.

- 1) VSP personnel hold an on-site workshop with park staff to develop the survey questionnaire and plan the study.
- 2) Once the superintendent approves the questionnaire, VSP staff submit it to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) for review and approval.

3) In the field, the VSP uses a trained interview team consisting of VSP interviewers, volunteers, and/or park staff to distribute the stamped, addressed questionnaires to a random sample of visitors during a 7-10 day period. A VSP survey supervisor remains on-site throughout the survey period. Sample sizes vary from 300-1,600 visitors, depending upon park visitation and needs. Visitors fill out the questionnaires and mail them to the UI PSU.

4) The data is coded and analyzed.

5) VSP personnel prepare a draft report in an easy-to-understand graphic format (see Figure 1) for park staff review.

6) After the draft is revised, a final report is printed.

7) A workshop is held at the park to explain the results to park staff and park partners (such as local community leaders). Additional analyses are provided upon request.

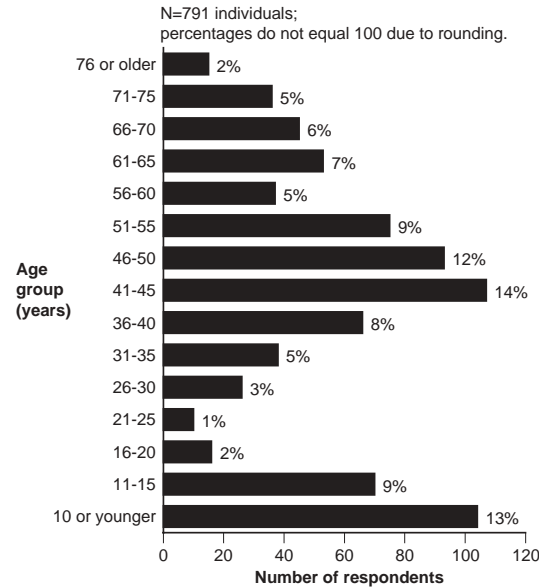


Figure 1: Sample VSP graph (Visitor ages)

“The professionalism with which the survey was carried out and the close-out presentation have all combined to give the park some very usable data—some of which we have already put to work in federal court. We encourage all parks to embark upon this process.”

Superintendent
Devils Tower National Monument

Why A VSP Study?

A VSP study provides park managers with scientifically accurate data about their visitors. Each study can provide information about visitors including, but not limited to:

- demographics, such as age, zip code or country of residence, education, length of stay, number of visits to the park unit, languages spoken and ethnicity
- trip planning
- travel expenditures
- service and facility use
- service and facility importance and quality ratings
- preferences for future services and facilities
- opinions about resource management issues.

Each VSP questionnaire contains 3 types of questions:

- **core**—basic demographic and related questions that are asked in every VSP study
- **common**—questions that are frequently asked in VSP studies, such as sources of information, reasons for visiting, expenditures, crowding issues, use, importance and quality ratings of park services and facilities
- **customized**—questions designed specifically to meet one park’s information needs, such as finding out the number of vehicles seen while in a specific area of backcountry, opinions on prescribed burn policy, and so forth.



“Probably the greatest use will be to provide input to or as supporting data for several ongoing planning projects at the Outer Banks Group. For example, we are currently developing the Fort Raleigh General Management Plan and a commercial services plan. We believe consideration of the VSP results in these plans will give us more accurate assessments of resource management and visitor concerns while developing these plans

Superintendent
Outer Banks Group

Ways VSP Results Are Used

- Park superintendents can use the information in preparing required planning documents (e.g. General Management Plans, interpretive plans, and hiring justifications).
- Planners and designers can use the data to improve the design of visitor facilities such as campgrounds or trails.
- Interpretive managers can tailor programs to match visitor interests and needs.
- Resource managers can combine visitor data with biological data to better protect park resources.
- Concession managers can determine whether the services they offer are meeting visitor needs.

- Local businesses can determine how visitors are contributing economically to the area, and discover new markets.

The VSP Advantage

VSP studies provide a snapshot of the overall visitor population in the park during the 7-10 day study period. The VSP system has been carefully designed to meet information needs at individual parks. The design incorporates a number of advantages for park superintendents, including:

- proven methodology
- cost-effective--parks must fund their own studies, but costs can be spread over two fiscal years
- high response rate (since 1988, VSP studies have averaged a 78% return)
- detailed and customized visitor feedback
- timely results (approximately one year from project start to completion of final report and workshop)
- comparability with other VSP studies’ results.

“The survey methodology was carefully designed, tested, and revised, and its rate of response is so successful (75-85 percent) that it has been published in the social science literature and widely used, even in other countries.”

Evaluation of the VSP by the National Research Council. (1992) Science and the National Parks. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.

Opportunity for “Small” Parks

We hope to offer Recreational Fee Demonstration funds to assist small parks in funding a VSP study again in FY05. A small park is defined as one that had, in the previous fiscal year, a budget of less than \$1.5 million ONPS. Several parks each year will be offered funding assistance to support a VSP study. Contact the VSP Coordinator for details.